

## Consumers perceptions of combined “fair trade” and “organic agriculture” labels on food products

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Key words: ethical label, fair trade, organic agriculture, consumers' representations

### Abstract

*Responsible, ethical, sustainable, citizen consumptions, those terms refer to new consumption behaviours more and more present in the market, society debates, or sociological and marketing research. This study is in the line with previous studies made on ethical consumption in the last ten years. We focused on the question “How do consumers perceive the combined « organic agriculture » and « fair trade » labels on the same product?” A qualitative survey, combining interviews and focus groups, showed the high diversity of representations and the interactions linked to those two concepts and their combinations. If the two labels are used by food chain stakeholders as complementary, they have been differently perceived by consumers: more, some consumers perceived some contradictions between them. We can distinguish six different profiles of consumers on the basis of perceived specific interactions: from the total synergy to the contradiction between “organic agriculture “and “fair trade”.*

### Introduction

According to Vermeir and Verbeke (2006), the last two decades have seen a rise in consumer ethical concern, particularly in Europe. These ethical concerns express themselves in the purchase of ethical products and a responsible consumption behaviour. On the ethical food market, organic agriculture (OA) and fair trade (FT) products remain the stars performers in terms of sales growth; besides each of these products can be proposed distinctly or combined to consumers. While the organic movement deals with the environmental questions, fair trade is about social concerns and is supposed to contribute to better life conditions of southern producers. These movements were “alternative trades” for a small part of producers and consumers, they are also now becoming an important business for companies which had the idea to combine those concepts on products (Moreno-Penarada, 2006). If inside the movements, the stakeholders debate on the complementarities or contradictions between these movements, our study investigates if the consumers perceive the compatibility between OA and FT labels.

Recent studies indicate some confusions (De Ferran, 2007) or interactions (Tagbata, 2006) between these two attributes for consumers. This double labelling package could be perceived differently, sometimes negatively by the consumers (Tagbata, 2006). However, the usefulness of these results is limited by the poor description of the origin of those interactions. Thus, our study aims at understanding these interactions by revealing the representations (Gallen, 2005) and the trade-off between

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selfish and altruist values. Personal values are fundamental psychological variables to understand ethical behaviours (Vuylsteke and al., 2002). Many studies show that the main motivation of organic products purchase is, not first the environment (altruist motivation), but health and enjoyment (selfish motivations) (e. g., Henson and Traill, 2000). In fair trade case, several papers mention “the support of small consumer” as the main motivation (Sirieix and Codron, 2004). But we can suppose that these motivations are not homogeneous and that there are also selfish motivations like the originality of an exotic product, the traditional skills respect, a more authentic taste or novelty seeking. Thus, these heterogeneous motivations and the interactions between representations could be a basis for consumer misunderstanding.

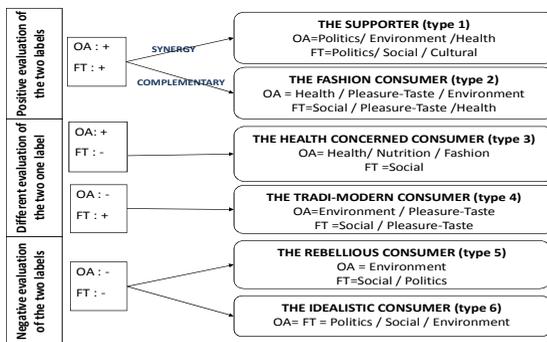
## **Materials and methods**

Our objective is to reveal the diversity of OA and FT representations in order to describe the interactions between these notions for consumers. We used two complementary interview styles: the individual interview and the focus group. In all, we interviewed 45 persons in order to have a very heterogeneous sample. We paid attention to socio demographic data (17 men and 28 women, age from .22 to 70, different working activities), consumption behaviour (OA or FT buyers or not) and involvement (in environmental or social associations or not ). Based on thematic and individual analysis, the data allowed us to put in light the diversity of the consumers' representations and finally, six types of combined OA and FT representations.

## **Results**

We collected all the consumers FT and OA representations: movements, ethical-labels, consumers and producers representations. In general, the OA representations were complex, very heterogeneous and linked to a high diversity of vocabulary. We made a distinction from the most individualistic to the most altruistic ones: health, nutrition, fashion, taste-pleasure, environmental representations and finally political and social representations. In the same way, we collected the FT representations. Even if the vocabulary was less complex than in OA representations, as supposed in the main hypothesis, fair trade product purchase motivations were very heterogeneous. We can distinguish the natural, pleasure, social, cultural and political representations.

Once identified these representations, we examined their combinations. This study revealed that not all consumers favourably perceive the combined OA and FT labels on the same products. We interpreted the perceived complementarities and contradictions with the congruency and dissonance concepts. The analysis of the combined representations resulted into six profiles that consumers can adopt depending on the moment, the information received, their lifestyle, the nature of the products... Our typology is inspired by Ruwet (2007), who built a typology of engaged consumers from the image they had of production and farming of these movements. Within our six consumers profiles, three of them are related to Ruwet's typology: supporters, inspired and tradi-moderns. The consumers are organised in three classes of combined representations:



**Figure 1: Description of combined representations (inspired by Ruwet (2007))**

- Consumers in the first class consumers value OA and FT products. Supporter (type 1 in Figure 1) distinguishes himself by his sense of altruism and the perception of a synergy between the two attributes. The OA and FT movements are a credible alternative for conventional market and production. The fashion consumer (type 2) is more self oriented and purchases these products to keep up with a trend, to value himself or to belong to a social group of responsible consumers. He perceives an imperfect congruency between the two labels: he considers organic agriculture for the health aspects and fair trade for the “support of small producers” and for a better taste of these products. He purchases these products with an idea of double profit: «I have pleasure to taste this product and in the same time, I help the producers ».
- In the second class consumers do not value one of these two attributes and who have a negative image of the product with the two labels: The health concerned (type 3) and the tradi-modern (type 4) consumer. It is a self-dissonance phenomenon related to the image they have of the consumer profile of this kind of product. It means a gap between the image they have of themselves and the image they have of the label or of consumers who choose these products. Thus, the health concerned consumer who buys organic products for selfish motivations is in opposition to fair trade “engaged” consumers altruistic values he imagines. However, he can be reassured on sanitary security of FT product if it is also OA labelled.
- In the third class consumers fundamentally agree with these movements principles but are opposed to the shape they are getting. They associate the label to a brand and criticize this growing business. They do not buy OA and FT products. It is a functional dissonance phenomenon; it means a gap between ethical consumer concerns and the label perceived reality. For these consumers there is a strong incoherency between their label representation and the ideal representation of the altruistic movements.

The fact that no respondent declared that he just not cared about OA or FT may seem surprising. However, we can explain it by the social desirability bias induced by ethical issues.

## Discussion

Our results show the nature of the interactions shown up in Tagbata (2006) and De Ferran (2007) works. Congruency and dissonance theories allowed to understand bringing to light some interaction mechanisms: congruency and self dissonance in relation to beliefs, to attribute aims, to labels and to ideal representations.

This distinction between the movement and its shape, the label, is recurrent in consumer speech and seems to be very important to take into account in this kind of study. We distinguished these different interaction mechanisms, but they are not exclusive the ones and the others and can be combined by one person. For example, a person « health minded » will consider that the « fair trade » label is incoherent with the image he has of himself (self dissonance), but the certification « organic agriculture » will reassure him on sanitary conditions of production (imperfect congruity between attributes).

## Conclusion

This qualitative survey, combining interviews and focus groups, showed the high diversity of representations and the interactions linked to OA and FT concepts and their combinations for the consumers. If those two labels are used by food chain stakeholders as complementary, they have been differently perceived by consumers: more, some consumers perceived some contradictions between them. We have distinguished six different profiles on the basis of perceived specific interactions: from the total synergy to the contradiction between “organic agriculture” and “fair trade”. From a methodological point of view, this survey focused on an exploratory work and qualitative objectives. A quantitative survey will allow collecting more data to evaluate the weight of the profiles that we described.

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